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Contact

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Newsletter of the Association of Teachers of English as a Second Language of Ontario

Levels of English Proficiency (*LOEP*): A Computer-adaptive Language Test

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Abstract

Levels of English Proficiency (LOEP) is a computer-adaptive language test developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) for The College Board of New York, to be used for student placement in both two-year and four-year post-secondary institutions. This paper describes the *LOEP* test and points out a few considerations when using the test, with reference to how one post-secondary L2 program in Ontario has used it in the past.

Introduction

Finding a reliable and valid test which assesses L2 proficiency to the extent of accurately placing students in appropriate learning levels is a challenge that all institutions face. A great benefit of the technology boom in recent years is that many placement tests have been computerized, thus saving educational institutions hours of time which could be spent profitably elsewhere. *Levels of English Proficiency (LOEP)* is one such computer-adaptive language test, (CALT), developed by the Educational Testing Service, (ETS), for The College Board of New York. It is one of eight components of The College Board's ACCUPLACER, a computer-software system designed for college-student placement.[1] *LOEP* was added to ACCUPLACER in 1993 as a low-threat English placement test for L2 and remedial L1 students, "regardless of their level of academic preparedness", seeking admission to a college with "open-door policies" (1997, *ACCUPLACER Program Overview: Coordinator's Guide*: 82).

This paper arises from my work at two colleges over two years. The first college I was employed at helped to pilot *LOEP* in the 1992-93 academic year (*LOEP* was officially introduced to ACCUPLACER a year later). It was part of a continuing computer project initiative in conjunction with ETS, the

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From the Editor

Happy Spring. One can only hope that by the time this issue reaches you, the warmer weather will have returned. It's been a tough winter for everyone, especially for our students who are braving the cold for the first time.

In this, our third on-line issue of *Contact*, you'll find a variety of information. University of Western Ontario lecturer, Steve Sider comments on Literacy testing and ESL, and Seneca College's Jean Neilsen explains the convenience and practicalities of LOEP computerized language testing.

You may have already seen Mary Meyer's paper, *Myths and Delusions*, on the TESL Ontario website. We've included the Executive Summary in this issue, and we invite you to respond to it.

I talked with a Ministry of Education spokesperson to try to de-mystify the province's complex ESL funding formula, and then I interviewed ESL Consultants from Durham Catholic and Peel school boards for their comments on the funding.

North York/York Region Affiliate is profiled in this issue, and Windsor WEST is the featured community agency. In addition, our Associate Editor, Heather Saunders went undercover to poll private ESL schools around Toronto and was happily surprised to find that many require their staff be TESL-certified. One school even recommended she call TESL Ontario to get the most current information on certification.

Please remember that material published in *Contact* does not necessarily represent the views of our editorial committee or TESL Ontario staff. We always welcome your comments, suggestions and submissions as well.

As usual, in May you will receive a hard copy edition of the Research Symposium papers and presentation write-ups from our 2003 conference. Then, in June/July a regular Conference Proceedings issue will be posted on-line. Thank you to the several presenters who have already submitted their papers and write-ups from the conference.

Brigid Kelso, *Contact* Editor

President's Message

As President of TESL Ontario for 2004-2005, I thank you for placing your confidence in me. I am deeply committed to both the organization and my responsibility as president for the next two years.

For many of you, TESL Ontario represents the annual November conference where you have an opportunity to learn new things and renew acquaintances with other ESL professionals. We are also, however, an organization that is frequently consulted by governments at the federal and provincial level. Ministry representatives regularly attend board meetings, and seek our input on ESL issues.

The members who represent the affiliates on the TESL Ontario Board of Directors are busy! These volunteers meet throughout the year to address the concerns and strategize ways to address the needs of our constituents whether it's at the elementary, secondary, adult, college or university level. Your voice is heard at the Board level through your Affiliate Director who is elected annually. S/he represents the affiliate and is empowered to vote at the Board table. Each affiliate director participates in one or two committees, which focus on a particular issue. Key decisions are discussed at length at the Committee level and recommendations are made to the full Board where voting takes place. With meetings occurring five times a year, you can imagine that our agenda is full and the pace is quick! However, with a group of highly dedicated professionals at the table, we get the job done. I thank each and every one of these individuals, some of whom travel great distances to give of themselves because they are committed to our profession.

It is through our terrific volunteer board members and the enormous support from our great office team, that TESL Ontario will continue to balance the needs of government with the concerns of our members, as well as the needs of our students at all ages and stages. I look forward to the challenge!

Barb Krukowski

College Board, and the League for Innovation in the Community College.[2] The college has been using *LOEP* ever since to place its incoming students. As an instructor in the English for Academic Purposes, (EAP), program, I personally was not involved in student placement, but I certainly lived with the results of it! Furthermore, at the time I was there, the college had just expanded its program from three to eight levels. After this expansion, *LOEP* played an even more crucial role in the placement of L2 students. It is for this reason that I chose to examine the *LOEP* test in general and to assess its usefulness for Canadian college-student placement in particular.

The *LOEP* Test

Test History and Development

In a 1988 nation-wide survey, American ESL educators expressed the need for a computer-adaptive ESL test to aid in the more efficient placement of large numbers of students entering two-year colleges. Thus, ETS took on the task of developing a test that would be useful for both two-year and four-year post-secondary institutions (*Coordinator's Guide*: 11). The test development process was comprehensive, consisting of five phases including:

1) forming the test specifications (purpose, skills, content, format);
2) writing the questions, using a variety of experts, and having internal and external reviews "to assure... [the questions met] ETS standards for currency, sensitivity, and bias-free language" (*Coordinator's Guide*: 9);
3) extensive pretesting;
4) preparing the final test (using those questions which passed the pre-testing phase, and reviewing the test as a whole);
5) analyzing post-administration data (of which tester and testee feedback was just one part).[3]

LOEP was completed and added to ACCUPLACER in 1993 as part of its DOS-version computer-adaptive test (CAT). Then, in 1998, ACCUPLACER went on-line, becoming a web-adaptive test (WAT) which was, according to its brochure claims at the time, "the first and only program of its kind to be delivered over the Internet".[4] The college I was working at chose to switch to the web-based version in 1999 because it was even easier than before to administer, and was less costly in terms of software installation and upgrading.

Format and Content

LOEP is an untimed, fixed-length computer-adaptive test.[5] In its basic form, it consists of three subsections, each with 20 questions (multiple-choice and one word or short phrase fill-in-the-blank). The test takes approximately 30 minutes to complete.

1) Reading Skills assesses reading comprehension of short and medium-length passages (50 words or less, and 50-90 words) on a variety of subjects such as Arts, History, Psychology, and Science. It includes both basic comprehension questions (eg. paraphrasing, vocabulary, pronoun reference) as well as inferencing skills (eg. main idea, fact/opinion, point of view).
2) Language Use assesses a large number of grammar skills and usage, such as subject-verb agreement, verb tenses and forms, prepositions, fragments, and run-on sentences.
3) Sentence Meaning assesses word-meaning comprehension in one- or two- sentence contexts, on a variety of subjects. It tests such areas as phrasal verbs, idioms, adjectives and adverbs, connectives, and commands.[6]

The College Board web site shows that there are two additional, optional subsections to *LOEP*: Listening and WritePlacer ESL. Because the college I taught at did not use these last two subsections, I have chosen not to include them in my review.[7]

Uses

As are all of ACCUPLACER's computerized-placement tests (CPTs),[8] *LOEP* is designed to be used for low- or medium-stakes purposes, for students who have already been accepted into a post-secondary institution. It cannot be compared to the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT),[9] a high-stakes test which assesses more general abilities and is used for college/university admissions as well as for granting scholarships.

ETS claims that *LOEP* can be suitably used for testing, re-testing and post-course testing purposes because the item numbers and sequences in a session are expansive. The memorization of questions would be nearly impossible, and the computer-adaptive nature of the test means that no two tests are alike. A further use comes with the Proficiency Statements (written and reviewed by ESL specialists) provided by ACCUPLACER, which give specific information about what knowledge or skills students can be

expected to have at certain points on the CPT scale. Using these statements, "the test content can be matched to course curriculum to assist in the development of placement scores and to foster alignment between test content and curricula. Proficiency statements also provide students with descriptions of their strengths and weaknesses so that they can work on improving these skills" (1994, *ACCUPLACER Proficiency Statements*: 2).

Observations

Establishing guidelines to help assess a CPT like *LOEP* remains a challenge. J.D. Brown (1997) and Patricia Dunkel (1999) address many of the issues that test developers and test users must consider with CBTs and CATs, but as yet no one has pulled all the information together. Even less general information is available on CPTs, other than some dated research supported by The College Board itself (which does not render it meaningless, of course!).[10]

I believe that *LOEP* is a good CAT (and WAT). With the full weight of ETS and The College Board behind it, ample funding was provided for research, measurement, analysis, development and piloting purposes.[11] It appropriately defines its purpose and target population, and the questions in the item pool – carefully written and pre-tested – appear to be fair and useful for assessment purposes. The test reliability for each of *LOEP*'s subsections has a coefficient of .87 or higher (*Coordinator's Guide*: 18), exemplary for a low-stakes test. Extensive guidelines for tester and testee usage, along with copious background information and performed technical information accompany the test. As a "high-tech" web-based test,[12] most of the work is done by the server, with six-day-a-week on-line support. In order to guarantee delivery, ACCUPLACER even provides a separate dial-up number in case the college computer system is down. The only real drawbacks are when the Internet is in heavy use, making download time somewhat slower (a minor inconvenience), or if the Internet itself is not working (which is rarely a problem). Although rarely a problem, downloading is slower when the server is down or experiencing a high volume of users. In this case, the test cannot be taken "on demand," and a pen-and-paper version is no longer available.

Unfortunately, I cannot properly address the effectiveness of *LOEP* as a stand-alone CPT because the college's L2 placement at the time I was reviewing the test included the student's *LOEP* score, a writing sample (marked by EAP faculty) and often an accompanying interview. It would be interesting to do further research on this, to see how often students were placed in a level that was contrary to *LOEP*'s recommendations, but this was not possible at the time. It would also be interesting to see if the two optional subsections to *LOEP* (Listening and WritePlacer ESL) could have provided the supplementary information about a student that the EAP faculty was looking for in the personal interviews.

Another area bearing further research would be an examination of placement results when institutions re-set the cut scores, since programs that have more than the basic three levels outlined by *LOEP* must alter the cuts scores as well. This is clearly a key issue in CALT; Brown (1997) points to a multitude of literature on the issue of decision-making regarding cut scores (52). Re-setting the cut scores is not unusual or discouraged by ACCUPLACER; *The Coordinator's Guide* clearly states: "Since placement criteria for your institution are unique, it is not possible for the College Board to provide you with definitive rules to use in your interpretation of scores and placement of students" (31). The *Guide* goes on to recommend an ETS publication entitled **Passing Scores**, which describes several ways of approaching setting cut scores, using the individual institution's existing placement practices as a starting point. It also suggests that these scores can be modified as the individual institution "gains experience with the CPTs" (32). While it is useful that ETS has provided help in this matter, it shows that institutions choosing to change the cut scores no longer have a basic tool they can simply administer to incoming students. Much time would be needed to look at, experiment with, follow-up and review the various suggestions ETS offers.

Another issue to address when using *LOEP* is construct-relevant variables such as computer-familiarity or computer-anxiety, and their impact on student performance in *LOEP*.[13] The college I was at was well aware of the importance of making students feel as comfortable as possible during placement testing. Still, in my work as a Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) teacher, I have found there are still some students (though relatively few) who are computer-illiterate. I cannot help but wonder what effect this might have had on their computerized-placement performance. For this reason, a further written test and oral interview to supplement the *LOEP* test certainly makes sense.

Conclusion

A tool is only as good as its user. How do ETS and The College Board ensure that *LOEP* is being used the

way it was intended? Is it even one of their functions? *LOEP*, as far as I am able to determine, is an effective low-threat computer-adaptive placement test, though educational institutions will still need to adapt it. When I began my research, I had not realized how much there is still to explore in the area of computerized-placement testing. Two major figures in computers and language teaching, Mark Warschauer and Deborah Healey, have stressed the necessity and potential rewards for further work in the overall CALL field. "Proof is elusive, but as more research is performed, we come closer to having a sense of the role that technology can and should play" (1998: 63). Technology in education is here to stay – our job as educators is to be sure we are using it in the most effective way possible.

APPENDIX I: CONTENT PERCENTAGES OF *LOEP* TESTS

Computerized Placement Tests – *LOEP*	**Approx. % of Test**
Reading Skills	10-15
Arts/Humanities	10-15
History/Social Science	10-15
Practical Situations Narrative	10-15
Psychology/Human Relations	10-15
Science	10-15
Sentence Meaning	15-25
Particle, Phrasal Verbs, Prepositions of Direction	25-35
Adverbs, Adjectives, Connectives, Sequence	5-10
Basic Nouns, Verbs	10-15
Basic Idioms	20-25
Language Use	10-15
Nouns, Pronouns, Pronoun Case Structure	10-15
Subject-verb Agreement	20-25
Comparatives, Adverbs, Adjectives	
Verbs	
Subordination/Coordination	

Taken from The College Board (1997). *ACCUPLACER Coordinator's Guide*. Pp. 18-19.

Endnotes

1. *LOEP* is owned jointly by ETS and The College Board (see ETS *LOEP* tracking number TC020016. See also www.collegeboard.org/accuplacer/html/LOEP.html.). For further information about ETS, see: www.ets.org; about The College Board and ACCUPLACER, see www.collegeboard.com.

2. The computer initiative began in 1986. For a more comprehensive discussion of the League for Innovation in the Community College, and the role of Ontario colleges in this League, see Sheila Susini and William Totten, eds (1994: v).

3. See pp. 8-15 in the *ACCUPLACER Program Overview* for more information on *LOEP* development, specifications, pool sizes, etc.

4. See the brochure (1998), *ACCUPLACER goes online!* Published by The College Board. Note that there are certainly several on-line CBTs today.

5. **Computer-Adaptive Tests**: With this form of computer-based testing, (CBT), test questions are chosen from a large pool of easy to difficult questions, and adapted to suit the level and skills of the individual examinee, based on the examinee's answer to the previous question. Each of *LOEP*'s three subsections has an item pool of 120 questions, from which 20 questions per subsection are selected and presented to the examinee.

   Item Reponse Theory (ITR): ITR is the underlying basis for adaptive-testing, in its ability to calculate item difficulty, discrimination, and estimates of students' abilities to accurately guess a question. Every time a student answers a question correctly, the next question will be of a greater level of difficulty. Incorrect answers mean that an easier level of difficulty will be presented the next time. As the test proceeds, the questions close in on the appropriate level of difficulty for the examinee. *LOEP* is a fixed-length CALT and has been constructed so that 20 questions can basically determine the examinee's level. For more information on CBTs, CATs and ITR, see Brown (1997) and Dunkel (1999).

Web-Adaptive Tests: This is the latest form of CBTs, where the test is delivered via the Internet. WATs are similar to CATs but have the additional advantage of "anytime, anywhere" for the testee, and where the "scoring scripts... can make the test completely independent of the tester". (Roever 2001, p. 6). *LOEP*, as part of ACCUPLACER's total package, has been on-line since 1998.

6. *ACCUPLACER PROGRAM OVERVIEW: Coordinator's Guide* provides a list of the Content Percentages of *LOEP*, in each subsection (p. 18-19). **See Appendix 1**.

7. See www.collegeboard.org/accuplacer/html/LOEP.html. I have been unable to find more detailed information about these last two subsections. They were not included in the 1997 *ACCUPLACER Test Administration Manual* provided by The College Board, nor are they described in any other materials that I have about *LOEP*.

8. Computerized Placement Tests (CPTs) is a trademark of The College Board. The basic purpose of CPTs is to assess the entry-level skills of college applicants at the beginning of their college careers, in order to determine what course placements are appropriate. The tests are computer-adaptive, and provide benefits to both students and administrators through quick, accurate and reliable testing. Test scores are provided immediately to expedite the decision-making process. See *ACCUPLACER PROGRAM OVERVIEW: Coordinator's Guide, p. 0.*

9. See the College Board website to learn more about this powerful assessment test.

10. The *ACCUPLACER Test Administration Manual* provides an extensive section of "Background Readings", of CPT studies conducted before 1991 in various colleges throughout the United States. None of these studies addresses *LOEP*, which would not have been available then. The same is true for the collection of Ontario CPT studies published by The Ontario CPT Consortium (in conjunction with The College Board) in 1994. *LOEP* was undoubtedly too new to be included.

11. See Bonny Norton Peirce (1992) for an excellent discussion of how ETS approaches test development.

12. Roever (2001) is a good source of information for the difference between high-tech and low-tech WBTs.

13. Cohen (1994) reports a study showing that CBT results *are* indeed influenced by past expertise (p. 47). Brown points to similar studies with computerised TOEFL tests, but also refers to studies which indicated that "after students participate in a computer-based testing tutorial, there is no meaningful relationship between computer familiarity and individuals' TOEFL scores" (p. 47).

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Warschauer, M and Healey, D (1998). Computers and Language Learning: An Overview. *Language Teaching*. 31, 57-71.

Websites:

ACCUPLACER: www.collegeboard.org/accuplacer/html/accupla1.html

ETS: www.ets.org

LOEP: www.collegeboard.org/accuplacer/html/*LOEP*.html

The College Board: www.collegeboard.com

Private Toronto ESL schools require TESL-certified instructors

Ten private schools throughout downtown Toronto were polled to see what their qualifications for ESL teachers are.

They were asked if a 100-hour certificate with only 2.5 hours of practicum* would suffice (I did not reveal that in addition to possessing this 100-hour certificate, I am on the brink of finishing certification at Woodsworth College).

Only two schools seemed willing to consider this certification. The issue most schools had with this certification was the length of practicum; most wanted 20 hours of practicum, although the 100 hours of training seemed to be fine.

Only one representative suggested working experience as a substitute for a short practicum. None of the other representatives inquired about experience.

The standard response most schools gave for their qualifications were 'TESL certification,' and two of the ten schools mentioned CELTA as acceptable.

It was pleasing that the last school contacted referred me to TESL Ontario, suggesting that it could recommend reputable insitutions offering the apparently much desired TESL certification.

Heather Saunders
Associate Editor, *Contact*

* from Winfield College in Vancouver

Profile: North York/York Region Affiliate

The North York/York Region affiliate was last profiled in winter 1999 when Margaret Dunn was president. Since then, under the efficient direction of Tonia Price Holliday, and now the equally capable presidency of Linda Cooper, the affiliate has grown from 124 members to 315: 108 teach in LINC, 96 in Continuing Education, 30 in colleges and universities, 25 in private schools, nine in secondary schools, seven in adult credit and six in elementary schools. We also have a number of students, retired instructors and friends of TESL among our members. This growth reflects the overall increase in the TESL Ontario membership since the certification process was instituted. It is also a result of the increase of immigrants who have made our region their home and the corresponding increase in ESL service providers.

We celebrated 25 years at our AGM and Mini-Conference in October 2001 with a great turnout and a very big cake! Jean Handscombe's executive would be proud of what so many have accomplished since June 25, 1976 when they applied for affiliate status.

Our members live or teach in a broad area that includes North York, Thornhill, Richmond Hill, Markham, Unionville, Aurora, Sharon, Bradford, Scarborough, Etobicoke, Toronto, Mississauga, Halton, Pickering, Whitby, Barrie, Woodbridge and Uxbridge.

For the past few years our conferences and workshops have been hosted by Kenton Learning Centre – except for 2000 when we met at the Toronto Catholic District School Board office. Our well-attended workshops continue to please thanks to the hard work of Chair, Madeleine Vojnov, Publishers' Contact, Galina Maloed and the executive committee as a whole. We appreciate the willingness of our presenters and speakers who give up their weekday afternoons or Saturdays and allow us to offer such a wide array of choices for professional and personal development. Helen Kwan is NorthYork/York Region's unflappable conference registration chair – and has the honour of being the longest serving member of the executive committee. The Nominations Committee will call for nominees before the next AGM, but those interested in serving on the Executive Committee or volunteering at a conference can contact our Membership Secretary Carmen Craioveanu (carmen@www.teslnorthyork.org) as there is a member-at-large seat vacant. Our very efficient Secretary, Bassouma Kossouf, joined by volunteering at a conference.

Treasurer Susan Richarz is leading the search for a more northerly location as we are well aware of how difficult it is for some of our members to reach Kenton.

To view what we have lined up for the April 17th Spring Conference and stay informed of our other events, visit our website designed by Serban Craioveanu. Go to www.teslontario.org and link with Northyork/York Region (or go to www.teslnorthyork.org). Although we have considered replacing the hard copy of our newsletter with an on-line version, attendees polled at the AGM voted we continue with the hard copy as long as funds allow. It is always a struggle to elicit material for the newsletter so we have decided to award $25.00 for articles or reviews (not lesson plans) accepted by the newsletter committee for the next two issues. E-mail submissions to Newsletter Editor, Angela Schinas at angela@www.teslnorthyork.org. Please note TESL NorthYork/York Region executive committee members are not eligible for the incentive.

As Affiliate Director, Claudie Graner attends the TESL Ontario Executive Board bi-monthly Affiliate Forum and Joint Directors Board meetings. At the Forum, questions and concerns posed by the affiliates are brought up and discussed. The Forum is also used for sharing information among the affiliates (for example: recommended speakers, how to start a website, how to deal with requests from the public). Questions or requests are sent to the Core Executive Director's meeting before the meeting, or brought up by the Secretary at the Joint Executive Meeting. The administration is shared among the affiliates on a rotating basis with an Affiliate Director acting as Secretary for one meeting and then Chairing the next. The North York/York Region Affiliate Director will be Secretary for the March 29th meeting.

To borrow the words of our new TESL Ontario President Barb Krukowski in her on-line message – we are at work "behind the scenes and year round" to provide the advancement to our profession that we are mandated. There is much work – but it is enjoyable – and the membership and profession as a whole profits from the commitment and support of all involved.

North York/ York Region Affiliate

From left to right: Susan Richarz – Treasurer, Linda Cooper – President, Carmen Craioveanu – Membership Secretary, Minoo Ebrahimi – Member at Large.

Affiliate Director, Claudie Graner (left) and Kathleen Wynne, MPP, Don Valley West.

Galina Maleod – Publisher's Rep.

Myths and Delusions
How ESL Integration Failed Our Students and Teachers

By Mary Meyers

Like the proverbial elephant in the middle of the living room that nobody acknowledges, the state of ESL* is a looming, mishandled entity that is taking over our multiethnic, urban school boards. Although the United States and Canada proudly espouse the benefits of immigration and diversity, and Ministries of Education have ensured politically-correct policies concerning racism, ethnicity and the disadvantaged (English language learners), in reality, something has gone terribly wrong.

In 2002, the advocacy group, People for Education, reported that ESL provision had been decimated by 60% in Toronto, Canada, the most multicultural city in the world. Cutbacks in ESL leadership followed in 2003. Larry Bourne, professor of Urban Studies at the University of Toronto said "The scale of changing ethnicity and language demographics has been absolutely staggering . . . and everybody, especially the schools, are struggling to keep up." [1] "Understanding the Early Years", a report funded by Human Resources Development Canada and released in November 2003, found that "Students whose first language isn't English were significantly less ready to learn". [2] Most states and provinces, however, do not allocate ESL funding to native-born students entering Kindergarten without English.

Inadequate and ineffectual language support is not a phenomenon unique to a few states and provinces. Large, urban school boards everywhere are in similar situations. How can we make sense of such obvious disparity: this steady increase of multi-linguistic, school clientele and a concomitant reduction of funds, resources, staffing, and professional development for effectively educating speakers of other languages? How can administrators tolerate the sharp decrease of necessary supports to needy ESL children? It's incredulous that some school boards can't acknowledge the presence of the elephant until it had one foot on their necks. This article explains how ESL integration, adopted years ago as a cure for the growing problems of language instruction and funding pressures was, in fact, a mythical panacea with wide-reaching, harmful, and long-term consequences for both teachers and students.

The Myth; Integration Misinterpreted

Integration is the practice of including students with exceptionalities in regular classroom programs. Successful integration occurs when teachers are capable of, and comfortable with, meeting the needs of these students, and when students are successfully meeting the requirements of that grade. Second language research has indicated that ESL students acquired language from natural peer interactions. In the 1970's, certain boards were looking in earnest for ways to address the needs of a student body that was increasingly diverse: ethnically, linguistically, culturally and religiously. From being one of many strategies, integration emerged as an all-encompassing method with a capital "I". Many board officials leapt on the bandwagon, espousing integration as an effective and expedient way to address the growing need for language instruction, increased staffing requirements and funding. Integration quickly became "the" main means of language support for ESL students, and the ESL buzz word for the next three decades.

The Delusions

As a board-endorsed thrust, "Integration" became endowed with amazing powers; all teachers became ESL teachers, ESL teachers became leaders, ESL students could develop linguistic and academic competencies without specialized supports, and equality in education was assured. Since Integration was, of itself, considered to be language support, monies intended for ESL teachers and language programs could be allocated to other areas. Government cutbacks to school boards and the standardization of grade content and mandated tests redirected board priorities and energies to new areas. Previously, teachers had addressed student diversity in language and literacy through student-centered, integrated skills programs, but Ministry mandates created classrooms that were grade- and content-focused, thus marginalizing ESL students even further.

Immigrant parents, ESL teachers, and classroom teachers continually expressed alarm. A 1994 Symposium on Integration Issues (Toronto) concluded that, "Although the pedagogical foundations of integration are sound, there are many concerns and misrepresentations regarding ESL integration, notably, the provision of support for students, the provision of leadership, advocacy, and equity and finally, the provisions for teacher-training".[3] Integration planning was inadequate and insufficient to ensure appropriate language supports and equity. Integration as interpreted was a myth. Regrettably, ensuing actions were delusions.

The Myth of Integration

Myths	Delusions	Reality	Abuses
• Integration provides effective language learning. ESL students will learn language skills along with grade level content. • Schools should implement Integration ASAP. • Integration is accomplished by the in-class support of an ESL teacher.	• A teacher in a regular classroom will know how to recognize and address ESL student needs in language. • Teachers will adjust easily and quickly, and curriculum documents will reflect ESL needs. • An ESL teacher will know how to work with ESL students in a class and collegiality is assumed.	• Language learners require high levels of English skills in order to succeed in grade tasks, particularly from the junior grades and on upwards. • Many teachers feel inadequate and incapable of meeting ESL needs. • Refugee students with special needs do not get adequate supports. • In schools with over 30% ESL clientele a "whole school" approach to the support of both students and teachers is required. This percentage includes kindergarten students from non-English speaking homes and language learners who no longer receive withdrawal support.	• Integration is often overwhelming, frustrating and unsuccessful for both ESL students and staff. • ESL students receive less support in the basics of language, fluency and literacy skills. • ESL students become scapegoats by not having adequate language skills for further learning and for standardized tests. • Parents assume that their child(ren) will have adequate language help and that teachers know what's best for their child. • Teachers' perceptions of an ESL student abilities are often overrated and unrealistic. See Klesmer Study.[1]

Myth: The Expanded Role of the ESL Teacher

The role of the ESL teacher usually included Orientation and Reception programs, initial assessments, entry programs for newcomers, beginning literacy and Liaison Worker between the school and immigrant parents. ESL programs were open to 'continuous intake', which meant that whenever newcomers arrived, ESL programs kept growing. Many ESL teachers had completed only one ESL course and they were at various stages of incorporating all of the previous roles. Most principals understood Integration to mean simply "in-class support", and so instead of working with six or ten ESL students building language and literacy basics, ESL teachers worked with one or two students at a time in different classes assisting students with a class assignment that usually lay beyond the students' linguistic abilities.

Myths	Delusions	Reality	Abuses
• It is the ESL teacher's responsibility "to do" integration.	• ESL teachers will know how to provide leadership and training for staff. • ESL teachers will link withdrawal programs to a student's class program instead of to the specific language levels and needs of the student.	• Essential programs for students at a basic level must be protected, • 'At risk' and refugee students may require even additional services such as guidance, family counseling for post trauma stress, as well as long-term plans for literacy.	• ESL staff often could not implement this new role due to a lack of P.D. and guidelines. • This new role often meant less time for other essential ESL services. • Administrators abdicated their own responsibility for insuring quality language and newcomer services. These were relegated to the ESL and classroom teachers.

Myth: All Teachers are ESL Teachers

There is a recurring statement that every teacher knows; like a cult mantra it is heard over and over again, and unfortunately most educators accept it as a truth. The existence of this myth, "All teachers are ESL teachers," does a disservice to both students and educators. Do we expect all principals and all subject instructional leaders to be ESL specialists? Indeed, all educators in multi-ethnic schools **should** be ESL teachers, but saying so doesn't make it so. In case we shake our heads at the difficulties inherent in large-scale ESL training, we should know that the state of California has already done it; a teacher cannot be hired there without ESL certification.

Myths	Delusions	Reality	Abuses
• All teachers are ESL teachers. • Classroom and subject teachers will be able to identify and to meet the needs of ESL students who are functioning at various levels of language and literacy.	• Teachers will know how to make adjustments for language learners in the presentation and methods of class instruction. • Teachers will use or develop assessment techniques specific to ESL students. • All ESL students will be identified. • Assessment and reporting procedures will reflect students' language levels.	• The majority of school administrators and their teachers have not had ESL training. Teachers don't know how to adjust lessons or assignments, homework or tests for ESL students. • Teacher perceptions of ESL student abilities are inaccurate. • Assessment of ESL students generally relies on the same criteria and methods as that of native English speakers. • There is a dearth of help, resources or time for teachers to learn how to assist ESL students.	• Teachers can't identify if an ESL student's difficulties are due to language gaps, a skill gap, a need for remediation or a cognitive deficiency. • ESL students do not receive special support unless they have an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) and most ESL students don't have one. • Teachers feel inadequate and frustrated. • ESL students lag in literacy, and have extreme difficulties comprehending subject content. • Student homework can take hours longer due to translation.

Junior- and high-school teachers on a rotary system, experience the greatest difficulty meeting language needs because of limited time periods, a defined curriculum, and a dearth of professional guidance. Language research indicates that it takes 5 to 7 years, often more, for ESL students to acquire native-like proficiency in English skills necessary for academic learning in high schools and higher education.

Myth: Students Will Learn Language through Content Instruction

Scenario: Your job is to teach grade 7 history – the early exploration of our country. Students are required to learn the reasons for colonization, expeditions, the defining interactions with native peoples and the consequences. As an introduction, you paraphrase the ideas as a story, and use a map and textbook to guide students through the facts. Gradually, it becomes apparent to you that ESL students don't understand these words: explore, explorer, exploration, conflict, examine, controversy, consequences, contributions, chronology, era, etc. Through questioning, you observe that other students, who appeared to speak English well, exhibit varying degrees of comprehension. Yikes! Then you remember – there's a video you can show to visually explain the ideas.

The next day most of your ESL students have not completed the 40-minute reading and question assignment for homework. Jin-he said he hadn't translated the entire passage yet. Alla didn't understood a 'prediction' question. Many couldn't complete the pro-con sheet, so you stopped your planned lesson to review that concept. You rushed to complete the five-week unit. Tests show that although many ESL students glean the main idea of the topic, their written work and tests are filled with all sorts of errors in spelling, grammar and comprehension. You realize the guides and texts for your grade are not geared for ESL students. You feel that you have failed your students since you couldn't meet either their needs in language or help them master the unit content. You become disenchanted.

> "A monolingual system of schooling serving a multilingual society unjustly requires all children to possess the dominant language (for learning and tests) but fails to guarantee that children can acquire that language to an equal degree."
>
> David Corson*

Delusion: Equity

Myths	Delusions	Reality	Abuses
• Equity is reflected in the decisions and practices of the board.	• Equal access to a quality education is assured for integrated ESL students. • Parents believe that our schools are providing adequate language and literacy supports for their children.	• Equity is not reflected in either the provision or practices for linguistically-disadvantaged English language learners. • Integration is failing ESL students. • Parents do not realize the extent of difficulties facing their children, or how to seek redress.	• Disproportionate numbers of ESL students fail, or quit school. • Parents are disempowered regarding their own children's education. • The solving and redress of inequities in ESL has been derailed by systemic inertia.

Delusion: Responsible Education

Unlike Rapunzel, who was a prisoner in the tower (with no choice in the matter), successive educational administrations continue to operate from within their ivory towers – out of touch and out of step with the times – their decisions and practices effectively ignoring the reality of the critical needs of ESL students and their teachers in multi-linguistic schools. Many school boards just keep working around ESL issues (like that elephant in the living room). Public sector educators must not be seen as having a personal or political agenda, and we certainly don't want meaningful change to be forced through litigation, as with bilingual education in the United States. School boards need to be more aware of how their funding decisions may result in the contravention of equal rights legislation in schools with a large percentage of English language learners.

Redirection

Unless we can articulate the mistakes and the abuses that were made, we can never redirect practice, or redress injustices in any real way. Integration has not produced the results boards hope for, and administrators need to rethink and enlarge upon their interpretation of ESL supports in light of current statistics and research. It is imperative that Directors and Superintendents of school boards obtain expert input for principals since their sincere efforts to help are often misguided. It must be made clear that meeting the challenges of developing quality education in multi-ethnic settings is a process. The first step is to change any notion of public education as a gatekeeper for English speaking citizens only. Provincial, State and District Boards of Education must assure the public that language learners and their classroom teachers are a priority and integral to school improvement plans.

Some boards are developing alternative plans to address teacher and student supports. Claire Brown, ESL Head for the fastest growing Catholic School Board in southern Ontario has developed an effective liaison system between her department, principals and area Superintendents. Claire's ESL committee is comprised of one principal representing each school district. Not only are administrators kept abreast of ESL needs, concerns and issues, but ESL has become integral to decision-making at the administrative level. York Region School District, also in Ontario, has made a decision to rework curriculum documents with strategies to impact directly on the teaching and learning of content for ESL students.

Tom Harper, an ethics journalist once said, "The absence of deliberate intent does not detract from, or mitigate the gravity of the guilt." Common sense, social justice and educational integrity require us to see that "elephant" in our midst and to recognize it as both an enormous problem of language equity, and as a challenge for multi-ethnic school boards to match action to rhetoric. Boards must begin to collect ESL-related data on all language learners, initiate ESL record-keeping commencing at kindergarten, and establish a tracking system that involves classroom teachers with their English language learners. This long-term monitoring is imperative to identify and support ESL students, especially those designated as being "at risk".

"A school with over 30% ESL clientele must specify language supports as a whole school priority", and plan accordingly in its yearly or long-term improvement plans.[5] Language supports must include school-wide initiatives, ESL expertise and a variety of ways and means for providing integrated support, appropriate resources and long-term professional development for staff. This redirection of resources must be made in an ambiance of advocacy, teamwork, accountability and expert input from ESL research.

Conclusion

In her 2004 New Year's message, Canadian Governor-General, Adrienne Clarkson said, "The public good is built through efforts to include, to accept, to make space for others . . . . we can look forward confidently towards the future if we know we have anchored ourselves today in what is good, and what is right."[6] It is both good and right that Boards of Education rethink and redirect language supports so as to anchor their practices in equity. What is right must supercede what is common practice.

Footnotes

1 Census Patterns, Toronto Star Newspaper, 12/02.

2 Not Quite Ready for Grade 1 Skills, Toronto Star Newspaper, 11/22/03.

3 TESL Ontario Conference Proceedings, 1994.

4 Klesmer, Harold, ESL Assessment and Teacher Perception of ESL Student Achievement, English Quarterly, Vol. 26, No. 3, Spring 1994.

5 Keynote Speech, Deborah Short, Centre for Applied Linguistics, at Diversity Conference, OISE, Toronto, 2003.

6 Text, New Year Message from Governor-General A. Clarkson, Canadian Press '04.

* David Corson in "Language, Minority Education and Gender: Linking Social Justice and Power."

Mary Meyers is a retired teacher with awards in curriculum development and literacy. Her first text, "Teaching To Diversity; Teaching and Learning in the Multi-Ethnic Classroom", won the 1993 Ontario Teachers' Federation Writer's Award and her recent text, "In Our Classrooms; An Educator's Guide to Helping English Language Learners with Curriculum" has been adopted by two school boards in southern Ontario. Currently, Mary is a teacher-trainer, consultant, and publisher. In 2002, Mary developed "1st Class English and the Language Buddies Program", a whole-school approach to supporting language, literacy and professional development in schools.
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Ombudsman Ontario

Working to ensure fair and accountable provincial government service

ESL Teachers Tool Kit

Do You Have A Complaint About Ontario Government Services?

If you or your students have a complaint and do not know what else to do Ombudsman Ontario may be able to help you.

But if you or one of your students feel a provincial government organization has treated you in a way that is unfair, illegal, unreasonable, mistaken, or just plain wrong, you should bring your matter forward to the Ombudsman's office. You may succeed in getting your own problem solved and you might help make changes so others are treated more fairly. Some examples of complaints that may be investigated include:

- Birth Certificates
- Health insurance (OHIP)
- Disability benefits
- Workplace safety and insurance
- Spousal or child support (Family Responsibility Office)
- Student loans (OSAP)
- Community Care Access Centres

Ombudsman Ontario have produced an ESL teachers kit (geared to intermediate to advanced students) as a result of a number of workshops and sessions with ESL students and their teachers and the need to increase awareness amongst newcomers of our services. We encourage the use of this toolkit for ESL teachers and would like your suggestions for improvement. We are also happy to come and speak to your class about Ombudsman Ontario, about how to complain effectively, and how to get complaints about Ontario government services resolved.

The toolkit includes:

- Ombudsman Ontario Summary
- Where to complain? Levels of Government game
- What is your complaining style? Exercise and Roleplay
- SMART complaining checklist
- Effective complaining: Roleplay and Review sheet
- "How to complain" case studies
- Ombudsman Ontario crossword
- Ombudsman Ontario word search
- Comprehensive reading comprehension exercises
- Ombudsman Ontario True and False

To also order Brochures, Newsletters, Posters or ESL kits for your classroom e-mail dmorra@ombudsman.on.ca, call 416-586-3353, or fax 416-586-3305.

Out-dated data prevents boards from meeting the needs of newcomer students

Brigid Kelso

Contact Editor, Brigid Kelso recently spoke by phone with ESL consultants of two of the province's school boards and a Ministry of Education spokesperson about its funding formula introduced in 1998 and the repercussions it has since had on these boards.

Durham Catholic District School Board ESL/ELD Consultant, Robert Cutting says that the money government provides for ESL under the new funding formula never stretches far enough, yet he adds that his board uses what ESL funding it does get to support the students with the highest need.

Cutting blames the Ontario Ministry of Education (M.E.)'s ESL funding formula, introduced in 1998. As a result of less ESL funding, Cutting says, Durham Catholic had to re-assign two-thirds of its ESL teachers: at the secondary level, these teachers were re-assigned to other subjects, while at the elementary level, full-time staff were replaced with itinerant ESL teachers.

"But we still have one ESL teacher in each of (the board's) high schools," he pointed out. "And our other teachers are all trained in ESL." He notes that his board does not distinguish between ESL and ELD.

Funding for ESL comes from a single line item in school board budgets called the Language Grant, which also provides for French language programming. There are two components to ESL funding. The first component funds students it considers to be recent immigrants, based on the date they entered Canada, and if English is a first or standard language in their birth country. It does not measure their need for ESL/ELD.

Students are eligible for three years of ESL funding following their date of entry into Canada. Government provides a total of $5,385 per pupil over the three years, weighted most heavily during the first year, when it is thought to be of the greatest need. Cutting says that this limited provision isn't enough since "it takes five to seven, and some say ten years, to become fluent in a new language."

The second part of the formula supports Canadian-born students aged five-19 who speak neither English nor French at home; it's intended to cover pupils who don't qualify for funding under the first part and is based on Statistics Canada data. The number of each board's students who meet the above criteria is divided by the number of the province's students who meet the criteria, and is then multiplied by $22 million.

Again, says Cutting, "It isn't enough because (Statistics Canada data) comes out only every four years, and so it's always out of date."

Cutting says that Durham Catholic spent about $358,000 on ESL for the year 2002/03. That school year, the board counted 432 elementary students who were eligible: 148 of whom were within their first three years in Canada and another 284, who didn't speak English at home. In the board's secondary panel, 97 qualified. That works out to be about $828 per student.

Compare these stats with data from 2001-02. That year, Durham Catholic had a total of 227 ESL students: 147 elementary and 80 secondary. Funding for that year was $508,179, or an average of $2,238 per student.

"The funding doesn't even come close to being adequate because there are another 294 (students) who don't qualify (for funding) but are on our caseloads. They get some money as a percentage of daily enrolment but it's very little," says Cutting.

Beth Gunding, ESL Coordinator for Peel Region School Board echoes Cutting's concerns. In addition, she is doubtful the government's promise last December of an additional $112 million (for literacy and ESL) will help meet the need. "The infusion will be a drop in the bucket, which will raise the per ESL student funding by just a few hundred dollars or so," she says.

Gunding estimates the number of ESL students in her board has more than tripled over the last seven

years, mushrooming from 6,000 in 1996 to more than 17,000 today. Her board plans to open six new schools this year and another six the following year to accommodate the thousands of new students in Peel region, 80% of whom she says come from homes in which English is not spoken.

"Back in '96, the ESL student/teacher ratio was 32:1. Now it's about 100:1," says Gunding, "which means that of all of the boards across the province, our ESL funding bears the least resemblance to our board's actual need (in the elementary panel). She admits that secondary funding more closely matches actual need because these older students are not eligible for the first three years' funding anyway.

M.E. spokesperson, Dave Ross argues that the actual per student funding hasn't changed that much under the 'new' funding formula – something Gunding argues hasn't been true since the Conservatives came into power in the late '90s. She says she'd like to see funding increased from $5,800 to $8-9,000 to be of any significance.

Ross says his Ministry acknowledges the outdated statistics and argues that it is looking at that as well as the other recommendations made in the Rozanski report released last year.

That report recommended that ESL funding be available for five years, as opposed to the current $5,800 over three years.

Conference Assistance

TESL Ontario is applying for LINC conference assistance for the 2004 TESL Ontario Conference, entitled

Language for Life

to be held November 18 - 20, 2004,
at the Holiday Inn on King Street
in Toronto.

If funding is granted, priority will be given to LINC instructors who conduct presentations, seminars or workshops at the Conference.

The experience of ESL teachers with the OSSLT: Implications for foreign students studying in Canada

Steve R. Sider

The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) has had a significant influence on all high school students in Ontario. However, English as a Second Language (ESL) students have been particularly affected by the test since all students are required to pass it in order to receive their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. This study examines the perceptions of three high school ESL co-ordinators regarding the influence of the test on ESL students. The co-ordinators provide insight into the ways ESL teachers are responding to the test and how they are changing their teaching practices. Finally, implications for foreign students studying in Ontario are provided.

Introduction

In 1999, the government of Ontario introduced the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) to measure students' abilities in reading and writing. The goal of the test is to ensure that all students in Ontario have reached an established standard of literacy before graduating from secondary school; every high school student in Ontario must pass the Literacy Test in order to receive their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). Students normally first write the Literacy Test in Grade 10 and may write it numerous times until they pass it. Recently, however, there have been some changes to provide a literacy course that students can take after failing the test twice. Students who are designed as being Special Needs, such as those with learning disabilities, can receive accommodations for the Literacy Test. Although with accommodations such as "Setting" and "Time" and – after a revision of the rules for the 2003 test – the use of multilingual dictionaries on the written component only, students in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs are permitted to defer the test until they have achieved the level of language and communication that a student would normally reach by the end of Grade 9.

As standardized tests, such as the OSSLT, become more common, there is a concern in the educational research community that teachers are "teaching to the test," meaning that teachers change their teaching practices in reaction to, or in anticipation of, standardized tests (Popham, 2001). The reason for the alteration of teaching practices is usually due to the negative publicity that comes from "below-standard" schools or boards as a result of low standardized test scores (Froese-Germain, 2001). Conversely, positive publicity can be generated from high results on standardized tests. Teachers may change their teaching practices to focus time and curriculum on ensuring that students are adequately prepared for standardized tests. A potential result is that some other important subject content may not be taught.

Due to the recent introduction of the Literacy Test in Ontario, no literature exists to indicate how ESL teachers are adjusting their curriculum and pedagogy to help their students pass the test. The lack of research in this area would suggest that there is an urgency to develop an understanding of the effect of the Literacy Test on the practices of ESL teachers in Ontario. While there is significant literature on how ESL teachers modify their programs to accommodate the needs of their students (O'Byrne, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Geekie & Raban, 1994), these modifications focus on the needs of the students and not on the requirement to pass a standardized test which is independent of the specific needs or history of the ESL student.

The Study

The purpose of this case study was to describe the ways in which three ESL co-ordinators have altered their teaching practices in response to the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test and to further consider how the test affects foreign students studying in Ontario. The study was conducted between 1998 and 2003, the time immediately before the implementation of the Literacy Test and immediately after the second set of Literacy Tests were written.

The teaching practices of the ESL teachers are defined as the development and delivery of curriculum. This is based on the idea developed by Pinar (2000) that teaching practices incorporate more than the deployment of information. Instead, they include the types of lesson and unit plans that teachers develop and the methods they utilize to deliver them. As well, they refer to the communication amongst teachers and with students. Thus, by definition, this case study describes more than just the information that is taught to ESL students to accommodate the Literacy Test. It also describes how this information is taught. Examples are provided of the communication that occurs, specifically that which is related to the modifications necessitated by the Literacy Test.

The key questions that this case study considers are:

1. Do some high school ESL teachers alter their teaching practices to accommodate the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test? If so, how?
2. How has the OSSLT affected foreign students studying in Ontario?

Related to these questions are a number of subquestions. For example, what were the responses of the ESL teachers involved in this case to the implementation of the Literacy Test? What do the adaptations of their teaching practices "look like"? Who was involved in making the decision to alter their teaching practices? What motivated teachers to adapt their teaching? Is it because students must pass the Literacy Test in order to graduate from Ontario high schools?

There were a number of limitations to this small study. It incorporated a case study approach and reported on the experiences of just three ESL co-ordinators. As a result, three situations described may not represent the experiences of other ESL teachers. Also, the study focuses on the experiences and insight of the teachers only, not the students, which may not account for the pressures that the students face in passing the test. Unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this study.

The three cases examined involved three different school systems. The three ESL co-ordinators represented two large public high schools and one small, independent international school in southern Ontario. The three schools are relevant for a number of reasons. First, the schools have high numbers of immigrant and foreign students, possibly due to the proximity of the boards and schools to the Canada-United States border. Second, each school has established programs, and there are multiple ESL teachers and an ESL co-ordinator. Finally, cases from public and independent schools have been included to describe how teachers from various boards may react differently to the test.

Results

It is evident from the interviews and observations that the ESL co-ordinators care very much for the students they are responsible for. They have realistic, but high, expectations of the English skills that their students need to develop:

> My focus is that often they [ESL students] will be successful in the academic regular English. So what I try to do is make the program very challenging at each level so that there's no surprises when they move from ESL into English. (Iris)[9]

> I firmly believe that unless, when you're teaching, ESL is fun, that kids don't learn. I really think there has to be a lot of different activities even in one day to keep them motivated, especially at the beginning. At the beginning level they've got to get vocabulary, they've got to get sentence structure and they've got to get listening skills in place and by the end of the first level understand what someone is saying to them and if they can respond and if they can write an academic kind of basic paragraph and read in a limited way for comprehension [they have been successful]. In the upper end, if they can go out into a regular English class and survive and do fairly well, that's my goal. (Ruth)

The ESL co-ordinators' desire to help their students learn English and complete high school seem to indicate their commitment to their students and program. As a result, they were highly interested and concerned about the effects of the Literacy Test.

Initial Reaction to the Literacy Test

Two co-ordinators indicated that they did not have a significant reaction to the test when they first became aware of it, although both suggested that they were curious about the test and recognized there may have been areas of concern. When the ESL co-ordinators learned that high school graduation depended on passing the test, they became more concerned.

> I thought "Oh my God, everything's moving too quickly" and I was just hoping, hoping, hoping that something would change. That they would be reasonable about it when it came to ESL students which I firmly believe they haven't been at all...well, I believe it's entirely unfair to the ESL student and I think to applied level students as well. My impression is that the test is geared toward academic type of students and it's not a test that's fair to the applied kid...I remember in my first year of teaching Grade 11 English, there was a boy in the class and I was shocked when I looked at his writing. I went to my department head and I said, "What am I suppose to do with this? How in the world did this boy get to grade 11?" Basically the answer was just move him along. He was a special ed kid, but he was brilliant in math but had zero skills in English. There are people like that in the world and to prevent them from getting a high school diploma I don't think is fair. (Iris)

The participants all agreed that they initially did not see that a literacy test was an inappropriate idea. However, their concerns increased when they were given details of the test and realized that it was a "high stakes" test that could significantly affect the future job and educational possibilities for their students.

Benefits of a Literacy Test

Each of the ESL co-ordinators recognized that students must achieve a standardized level of English literacy. None of the co-ordinators opposed having the test; they opposed its format and content.

> It may raise the expectations we have of kids and kids will rise to that expectation. So I thought it would maybe be a motivator for people to improve their communication skills. Now however, that I've had experience with it and I've seen kids come out of it, I don't know. (Iris)

> I do see benefits in that there is a standard and I don't think that's bad. I think that's a good thing, if it is a reasonable kind of test, if they are measuring the right things. But in my opinion the cost of this bloody thing does not equate to the value of it. To think that we could use that money for our teachers and our programs and resources, would far outweigh the value of the test. (Ruth)

One of the co-ordinators identified many benefits of the test. She indicated that she was a "supportive participant" of the test, whereas the others identified themselves as "grudging participants". The supportive participant indicated the following benefits:

> There are positive elements of the test. The urgency for ESL has risen dramatically - each class is significant. The laying out of the curriculum has taken on a huge significance. The students' awareness of the test has increased and the necessity of language acquisition. I think that the passing of the test is manageable and achievable. As well, it eliminates students from slipping through [high school] without becoming literate. It has focussed students on writing and grammar skills and different types of writing and reading. The kids who've passed say "I'm glad...it was worth it...", but before passing, "Do we have to [write it]?" (Cory)

ESL co-ordinators saw a test of literacy skills as a beneficial opportunity since it would provide a recognized standard of literacy. Further, the Literacy Test would push ESL teachers and students to develop literacy skills more quickly. However, the co-ordinators also expressed numerous concerns with the current OSSLT.

Concerns about the Literacy Test

The ESL co-ordinators expressed a wide variety of concerns about the Literacy Test. One of the most pressing concerns was the socio-cultural and linguistic difficulty that the students faced, both in and beyond the ESL classes they had to take. English as a Second Language students have a challenging time in high school (Gunderson, 2000). Often they get just one ESL class a day, while they are expected to take all their other classes in English. If the students are successful in ESL, they graduate from the ESL program in about two years. However, as Cummins (1989) has indicated, it can often take seven years of English instruction to achieve cognitive-academic language proficiency in English. Further, ESL students face the double challenge of learning a new language and adjusting to a new culture in which they often experience racism from their Canadian classmates (Gunderson, 2000). Each of these challenges hinders ESL students in passing the Literacy Test.

> It's made me more worried about students who are burnt out. Sometimes they've been here for 1.5 years and they've been doing everything they can and then they just feel burnt out. And they know this Literacy Test is around the corner and they just start to give up. (Iris)

The OSSLT increases ESL students' stress levels.

> In the past before the Literacy Test once they finished ESL they would go out into college level/ general level courses and they would get their Grade 11 English. They would pass that, maybe not well, and they would get enough on their courses to get a high school diploma and go out to the workplace, a couple of them are in apprenticeships, that kind of thing. That's not going to happen. These kids aren't ever going to pass so they are not going to graduate. Some of these students have an incredible work ethic, wonderful personality, and are great kids but they aren't smart. And in some cases it's because they missed their literacy. They missed so much education in their first language and everything that they could never catch up to be true academic kids who are going on to college, for instance. But we did get them that piece of paper which maybe helped in some small way for a job. (Iris)

The students are already challenged by a new culture and language.

ESL co-ordinators were also concerned about the content and procedures of the Literacy Test. For example, students weren't allowed to use dictionaries:

> [T]he fact that they're not allowed to use a dictionary I think is absolutely ridiculous. I still use one. Why would an ESL student of all people be expected to have the same vocabulary as someone whose native language is English? That is incredibly unfair. (Iris)

Although teachers are not supposed to examine the test, they did comment on the content of the test. Concerns were expressed that the content is largely Canadian-based and that the ESL student would not understand some of this contextual knowledge. Further, the co-ordinators suggested that elements of the test were "tricky" because they involved answers that were so closely similar that even the ESL teacher would have a difficult time determining the correct answer.

> [T]he content is all Canadian content. Many students have no background in Canadian history, geography, and literature. Therefore it is not fair, the content should be more general. As well, the feedback from markers is too sketchy and not enough to provide good feedback. The writing tasks like news reports seem too narrow of a task - when are students going to write in that format? Before the Literacy Test, field work was done a lot and then we used the language experience to prepare and follow-up with the students. The students were eager. Now, ESL classes are skills and grammar-oriented and so there is no opportunity to leave the classroom. Lots of pressure has led to a decrease in student motivation but perhaps created higher literacy levels. (Cory)

> ...the parts I did manage to sneak a look at the reading, oh, gosh it was tricky. They were trying to trick the kids and there was also just a little cultural bias as well that our kids didn't know the idiom. So I don't know what they are trying to prove. I really don't know why they put the bar up so high. We weren't expecting it to be that tricky. These kids have come an incredible way in a year and a half of being in Canada and the fact that they passed the writing and failed the reading because it was tricky, just seems so unfair, quite frankly. (Iris)

Concerns about test content questions the purpose of the test. If the test is measuring literacy skills, why would elements of the test be particularly "tricky"?

Related to the issue of the purpose of the test is an interesting concern that was raised by the ESL coordinators as to whether the Literacy Test is accurately measuring what it purported to measure – literacy.

> They are measuring academic ability certainly when they are making it that difficult but is that, in fact, what literacy means? I don't quite agree. I guess it is a question of what is the definition of literacy. I don't see as literacy being equal to a high academic kind of standard. (Iris)

> I've noticed there is a discrepancy of pass/fail students - some who passed should not have. Is it too subjective? Some who are excellent students froze on the test - will this impede progress to university? Therefore in this case, not a good indicator of literacy. (Cory)

The ESL co-ordinators had a number of concerns about the Literacy Test. They doubted that their students could write the test with their limited exposure to English and the added stress for already anxious students. They also questioned procedures and content of the test and the test's accuracy in determining a student's literacy ability.

Effect on Teaching Practices

It is hard to differentiate whether teachers are teaching to the test or are altering their teaching

practices because of the new curriculum documents which have been released as part of the changes in education in Ontario. However, the co-ordinators did indicate that some of their teaching practices had changed.

> Certainly at the D and E level it has altered our curriculum in that we are spending more time in academic writing and reading. We are making sure of their academic skills and that the kids understand the words and know what is expected. So, it has changed [my teaching practices] and I guess that's a positive thing. For example, until the literacy test came along, I never focussed a whole lot on how to write a newspaper story and that kind of thing. Summaries we did before all the time but we focus more on that now. The hard part for our ESL kids, is they can't look at a picture and do some creative kind of thinking. Just to be given a picture and say, "Make up a story about what's happening," you have to teach how to do that because it's something completely different than most of them have ever done in English. And also, that's where the cultural thing comes in as well. Some of the pictures [in the Literacy Test] have nothing to do with anything they have experienced so for them to write a newspaper story about it, that's a bit of a challenge. (Iris)

> There is 50% more writing and focus on vocabulary development. There is way more grammar now. Marking has increased immensely since students are re-writing essays and paragraphs. The emphasis has been on the writing component of the Literacy Test, therefore they are not writing in as wide of range of writing. Homework has increased. My teaching style has changed to a student centred class now with students practising, and I do much more one-on-one evaluation of writing skills. We have begun a tutoring program with the focus on the reading component of the test. My curriculum has not been as affected as other areas although one course has become a Literacy Test prep course. I look for similar comprehension questions as the Literacy Test for curriculum exercises. Unfortunately, my theme orientation has gone by the wayside since there is no time for this anymore, for posters, newspaper clippings, collages, reports...kids enjoy these but there is not enough time. (Cory)

A greater emphasis on skills development, particularly grammar and writing skills, has meant that the ESL co-ordinators have abandoned some other areas of curriculum and teaching methodology. As a result, they have observed that their students are not as motivated by the more structured, less conversationally-focussed, classes.

Suggestions

To make the Literacy Test more effective, the ESL co-ordinators offered a variety of suggestions, including: re-examining whether the Literacy Test should be a condition for receiving a high school diploma, defining literacy and developing a test based on this definition, providing greater financial support for ESL programs, re-formatting the test so it is easier to administer, and providing dictionaries or vocabulary lists to ESL students for use on the test.

> It's probably a good exercise for students to have to write this Literacy Test to show them in some ways that your communication skills are one of the most important skills you can have especially in this day and age, so write the test but all that will appear on your transcript will be a pass or fail. It should not determine whether or not you graduate. That's too extreme. (Iris)

> I still see the standard part as being important but I think that somebody needs to address the test to make it fairer or to make a definition of literacy that is fairer....I would in fact put the money back into supportive programs in our schools, either teachers or resources to get the kids that need help and want help in smaller groups and forget the test. (Ruth)

> I would allow all students, not just ESL, to use a dictionary. I can see arguments against this but I would see that ESL students got the use of a dictionary. I would not make it over two days. That's an administrative nightmare. I'd make it a shortened test, I don't see why it has to be that long. I would provide some sort of money for doing this thing. We're looking at next year, I don't know how we're going to do it, I don't even know where we're going to be able to have the test. We've been having it in various classrooms but now we have all the kids who failed the test who have to repeat it, we have all the kids who were deferred from this year who have to write it, and then we have all the kids from next year. So every year that we go along this thing gets bigger and bigger. Give us some ideas as to where we can go write it. We've got to take all the desks from somewhere and maybe put them in the gym. It's a logistical nightmare. It becomes one in

> the end anyway. So, I don't think there's anything wrong entirely with having students write a literacy test but this one was rushed and ill-conceived and unfair. (Iris)
>
> There should be allowances for second language learners – accommodations such as a vocabulary list given prior to the test for students to learn. They should have the test over three days instead of two and allow for grammar mistakes in the writing. I think there should be some changes to the content - I don't understand why they would have a news report. Also, it seems that there should be alternatives for not passing the test like a portfolio. (Cory)

ESL co-ordinators very much want their students to adapt to Canadian culture and learn English. Yet, in some ways, the current Literacy Test hinders ESL students from doing so. The suggestions that the ESL co-ordinators have given may provide a way to accomplish the goal of having a defined level of literacy while still accommodating the needs of ESL students.

Effect on Visa Students

Each year, thousands of students receive "student visas" to study in Canada. Many of these students enter the Canadian educational system to complete high school and then get in to a Canadian university. The government of Canada, along with schools and boards across the country, encourages these students who provide significant revenues to schools because they often are successful.

With the introduction of the Literacy Test in Ontario, there are significant considerations for these foreign visa students in high school ESL programs. One of the most pressing concerns expressed by the ESL co-ordinators for these students is the high-stakes nature of the Literacy Test. If the students are successful in completing all their course work to achieve the OSSD but do not pass the Literacy Test, they will not get accepted into a college or university.

> So the visa students generally have a strong educational program and they're very determined to get a high school diploma in Canada and then go to university in Canada. So they have a very clear path in mind. So for them they understand, probably grudgingly, accept the fact that they have to do this and so they will work toward it and probably eventually at some point become successful in the Literacy Test....[there are] huge implications because [if they don't pass the Literacy Test] their goals have to totally change and they may have to go back to their country. (Iris)

In some countries, students who leave the national educational system are not able to gain admission to a college or university there. As a result, the family has invested a significant amount of money in the hope that their child would be able to enter a Canadian university, and yet they find that they are in a less desirable position than when their child first left the country. Further, families may choose to have their child go to a different province or a country where there may not be a similar literacy condition as that found in Ontario. This should be of concern to the Ontario government which has encouraged international students to study in the province. Finally, since the Literacy Test is written only once per year, there is an added implication. If the foreign student arrives in September with the intention of being admitted to university for the following September, but does not pass it the Literacy Test in October (even if they have an acceptable TOEFL score) they will not be granted admission to university. Again, this illustrates the "high-stakes" nature of the current Literacy Test in Ontario.

A further concern expressed by the ESL co-ordinators is their desire to see ESL students socially prepared as well as linguistically prepared for life. They suggested that the Literacy Test can cause anxiety and depression in students and can lead to negative competition among students.

> They get discouraged and there is a lack of confidence and self-esteem. I have seen this happen this year and at a young age to lose the confidence is horrible. There is competition between students and a loss or gain of status. The management of this is challenging for ESL coordinators - if done positively, then the students cheer and congratulate each other if they pass, but I need to support those who don't pass so that the harmony of the class is not destroyed. (Cory)

For the ESL co-ordinator, who in many ways serves as a counsellor and encourager of ESL students, maintaining harmony in the classroom and positive self-esteem for each student, can be an enormous challenge.

Foreign students face many challenges when they come to Canada to study (Gunderson, 2000). They have family pressure to be successful in getting into a Canadian university or college. Furthermore, being

far from family at a young age can create emotional challenges for students. For foreign students entering high school in Ontario, they encounter the further obstacle of the Literacy Test. The fact that they must pass the test to graduate from high school can cause great anxiety. Finally, this means that ESL teachers have much more to do than simply teach ESL. They must encourage, counsel and mediate their students to maintain positive classroom interactions and to help each student, whether successful in passing the Literacy Test or not.

Conclusions

There are positive and negative aspects of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. Teachers identified that the Literacy Test provides a standard of literacy and a goal for students and teachers to strive for. However, the ESL co-ordinators indicated that they were concerned that the OSSLT does not take into consideration the backgrounds of students, especially ESL students. Many ESL students have to overcome challenges in adapting to Canadian schools and culture. The pressure of the Literacy Test exacerbates an already difficult and onerous situation for ESL students. It is a high-stakes test, one in which the student must pass to graduate from school. This added pressure can lead to depression and anxiety. Furthermore, ESL students often find the cultural context of some of the content on the Literacy Test difficult.

For foreign (visa) students, there are further implications. Positively, the Literacy Test can motivate the reading and writing levels of students who are in an Ontario high school for only a year or two. However, there are significant negative ramifications. As with other students, if foreign students do not pass the OSSLT, they will not be able to attend university or college unless they satisfactorily complete a literacy course. This adds immense pressure because they may not be able to return to their home country and enter university there. As well, since families make financial investments in educating their child, they may consider other provinces, states, or countries where the stakes are not so high. Thus, there are many implications of the Literacy Test for foreign students studying in Ontario.

It would seem that some consideration should be given to ESL students taking the Literacy Test. Particularly, consideration needs to be given to the definition of literacy in Ontario and to how this is assessed. The ESL co-ordinators involved in this study care for their students and want to see them succeed in their English. Their input, and the input of others in similar roles, would be useful to further refine what literacy means in Ontario.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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WEST Affiliate Profile

Organizational Mission Statement

Women's Enterprise Skills Training of Windsor Inc. (WEST) exists to provide training for severely disadvantaged visible minority women in order to improve their employability in the workforce and/or to further their education.

Located in the heart of downtown Windsor, Ontario, WEST programs have worked to improve the employability of visible minority and newcomer women in our community since 1987. WEST has accomplished this by offering a variety of full- and part-time programs related to the integration, settlement, and pre-employment training needs of our participants.

In addition to the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada program offered at WEST, we strive to meet other needs of our participants. We offer:

- Full-time English language training classes (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada)
- A job-finding program
- Internet access for job search and related purposes
- Pre-employment sessions
- Job development services
- Programs teaching computers
- Lifeskills training
- Community information and referral, and community integration information
- A clothing exchange program
- Paid and non-paid placement opportunities
- On-site childcare program
- Settlement services
- Special events, programs and services

The WEST on-site childminding program is equipped and staffed to serve toddlers and preschoolers. In addition to the support received by Citizenship and Immigration Canada for these services we have been able to enhance our delivery and obtain additional toys and equipment through special corporate grants and donations. The staff, mothers and children of the childminding program work together to ensure the program is as successful as possible. The provision of this service at a women's community-based training organization was a logical step. WEST childminding staff participate as workshop presenters both at the LINC childminders' conference and at locally sponsored professional development workshops.

WEST participants represent women from more than 50 nations and cultures. Our work is important because we recognize and build on the strengths of our participants as they strive to meet their individual employment goals. At the same time, we educate local employers regarding the benefits of a trained multicultural workforce. WEST has assisted thousands of women over the years and currently serves more than 800 women and their children each year.

Women's Enterprise Skills Training of Windsor Inc. is pleased when participants refer their friends and acquaintances to our programs. A special bond is also created when participants leave our organization, find employment and return to share their individual success stories, which often inspires the other participants to continue their pursuit to secure skills, and, subsequently, employment. These stories remind us that our services are making a difference in the lives of the hundreds of women who seek assistance here annually.

As a result of our expertise and experience serving the community and our ability to work with a wide range of partners, from newcomer service-providing organizations to major Canadian corporations, WEST has been recognized both nationally and locally for excellence in service delivery and community service on several occasions including:

- 2002 – Windsor-Essex Non-Profit Excellence Award, acknowledgement of a proven record of excellence in governance and administration and for setting and maintaining high standards of accountability and professionalism.
- 2002 – Volunteer Service Medals, Government of Canada, awarded to four members of the WEST Board of Directors (more than 200 applications received with just 32 medals awarded community-wide).
- 1998 – New Spirit of Community Partnership Award, the Imagine Program of the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy national award that recognizes partnerships with the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce to meet local needs.